

## Day 138 -- Perspectives on the Great Society Good or Bad for America?

**Directions:** Form a group of three. Read and annotate one of the the articles below, share your findings with your group. As a group create an editorial cartoon reflecting your feelings about the legacy of the Great Society. Photograph or export to PDF and submit to Google Classroom.

**Group member 1 read:** What Was Really Great About The Great Society (Modified) By Joseph A. Califano Jr. & War on Poverty Revisited (Modified) By Thomas Sowell

**Group member 2 read:** Randall B. Woods John A. Cooper Professor of History, University of Arkansas, and Author of LBJ: Architect of American Ambition

**Group member 3 read:** The Great Society at Fifty *What LBJ wrought* May 19, 2014, Vol. 19, No. 34 BY [NICHOLAS EBERSTADT](#)

### Major Great Society Programs

**War on Poverty:** forty programs that were intended to eliminate poverty by improving living conditions and enabling people to lift themselves out of the cycle of poverty.

**Education:** sixty separate bills that provided for new and better-equipped classrooms, minority scholarships, and low-interest student loans. Plus Head Start program for four- and five-year-old children from low-income families.

**Health Care:** Medicare & Medicaid guaranteed health care to every American over sixty-five and to low-income families.

**The Environment:** introduced measures to protect clean air and water.

**National Endowment for the Arts and the Humanities:** government funding for artists, writers and performers.

### Sampling of the laws passed during the Johnson administration to promote the Great Society.

PREVENTION & ABATEMENT OF AIR  
POLLUTION  
(THE CLEAN AIR ACT)  
DEC. 17, 1963  
VOCATIONAL EDUCATION ACT  
DEC. 18, 1963  
CIVIL RIGHTS ACT OF 1964  
JULY 2, 1964  
URBAN MASS TRANSPORTATION  
JULY 9, 1964  
FEDERAL-AID HIGHWAY ACT OF 1964  
AUG. 13, 1964  
CRIMINAL JUSTICE ACT OF 1964  
AUG. 20, 1964  
FOOD STAMP ACT OF 1964  
AUG. 31, 1964  
NATIONAL ARTS CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT  
ACT OF 1964  
SEPT. 3, 1964  
SOCIAL SECURITY AMENDMENTS  
JULY 30, 1965

VOTING RIGHTS ACT OF 1965  
AUG. 6, 1965  
HOUSING AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT ACT  
AUG. 10, 1965  
PUBLIC WORKS AND ECONOMIC  
DEVELOPMENT ACT  
AUG. 26, 1965  
DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING AND URBAN  
DEVELOPMENT ACT  
SEPT. 9, 1965  
NATIONAL FOUNDATION ON THE ARTS &  
THE HUMANITIES ACT  
SEPT. 29, 1965  
HIGHER EDUCATION ACT OF 1965  
NOV. 8, 1965  
CHILD NUTRITION ACT OF 1966  
OCT. 11, 1966  
CHILD PROTECTION ACT OF 1966  
NOV. 3, 1966  
NATIONAL SCHOOL LUNCH ACT  
MAY 8, 1968

Source: <http://www.colorado.edu/AmStudies/lewis/2010/gresoc.htm>

## **What Was Really Great About The Great Society (Modified)**

By Joseph A. Califano Jr.

*The Washington Monthly* (online), October 1999

If there is a prize for the political scam of the 20th century, it should go to the conservatives for [claiming that the] Great Society programs of the 1960s were a misguided and failed social experiment that wasted taxpayers' money. Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, from 1963 when Lyndon Johnson took office until 1970 as the impact of his Great Society programs were felt, the portion of Americans living below the poverty line dropped from 22.2 percent to 12.6 percent, the most dramatic decline over such a brief period in this century. . . If the Great Society had not achieved that dramatic reduction in poverty, and the nation had not maintained it, 24 million more Americans would today be living below the poverty level. . .

Since 1965 the federal government has provided more than a quarter of a trillion dollars in 86 million college loans to 29 million students, and more than \$14 billion in work-study awards to 6 million students. Today nearly 60 percent of fulltime undergraduate students receive federal financial aid under Great Society programs. . .

Head Start has served more than 16 million preschoolers in just about every city and county in the nation and today serves 800,000 children a year. . . . Lyndon Johnson knew that the rich had kindergartens and nursery schools; and he asked, why not the same benefits for the poor? Is revolution too strong a word? Since 1965, 79 million Americans have signed up for Medicare. In 1966, 19 million were enrolled; in 1998, 39 million. Since 1966, Medicaid has served more than 200 million needy Americans. In 1967, it served 10 million poor citizens; in 1997, 39 million. . . Closely related to these health programs were efforts to reduce malnutrition and hunger. Today, the Great Society's food stamp program helps feed more than 20 million men, women, and children in more than 8 million households. Since it was launched in 1967, the school breakfast program has provided a daily breakfast to nearly 100 million schoolchildren.

The Voting Rights Act of 1965. . . opened the way for black Americans to strengthen their voice at every level of government. In 1964 there were 79 black elected officials in the South and 300 in the entire nation. By 1998, there were some 9,000 elected black officials across the nation, including 6,000 in the South. . . .

*Source: Joseph Califano, Jr., became a special assistant to President Johnson in July 1965, and served as President Johnson's senior domestic policy aide for the remainder of Johnson's term.*

## **War on Poverty Revisited (Modified)**

By Thomas Sowell

*Capitalism Magazine* (online), August 17, 2004

The War on Poverty represented the crowning triumph of the liberal vision of society -- and of government programs as the solution to social problems. . . In the liberal vision, slums bred crime. But brand-new government housing projects almost immediately became new centers of crime and quickly degenerated (declined) into new slums. . .

Rates of teenage pregnancy and venereal disease had been going down for years before the new 1960s attitudes toward sex spread rapidly through the schools, helped by War on Poverty money. These downward trends suddenly reversed and skyrocketed. The murder rate had also been going down, for decades, and in 1960 was just under half of what it had been in 1934. Then the new 1960s policies toward curing the "root causes" of crime and creating new "rights" for criminals began. Rates of violent crime, including murder, skyrocketed. The black family, which had survived centuries of slavery and discrimination, began rapidly disintegrating in the liberal welfare state that subsidized (paid for) unwed pregnancy and changed welfare from an emergency rescue to a way of life. . .

The economic rise of blacks began decades earlier, before any of the legislation and policies that are credited with producing that rise. The continuation of the rise of blacks out of poverty did not -- repeat, did not -- accelerate during the 1960s. The poverty rate among black families fell from 87 percent in 1940 to 47 percent in 1960, during an era of virtually no major civil rights legislation or anti-poverty programs. . . . In various skilled trades, the incomes of blacks relative to whites more than doubled between 1936 and 1959 -- that is, before the magic 1960s decade when supposedly all progress began. The rise of blacks in professional and other high-level occupations was greater in the five years preceding the Civil Rights Act of 1964 than in the five years afterwards.

*Source: Thomas Sowell is a conservative economist, author, and social commentator. He is currently a Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University.*

# Randall B. Woods

John A. Cooper Professor of History, University of Arkansas,  
and Author of *LBJ: Architect of American Ambition*

## The Great Society: A Perspective

What I want to do today is bring you up to date on how historians and social scientists view the most significant Great Society programs nearly a half-century after their inception. The War on Poverty was built upon existing programs—Aid to Dependent Mothers and Children, and Social Security, among others—which the Johnson administration succeeded in broadening and deepening. The Economic Opportunity Act (EOA) was an omnibus bill that included a reinvented Civilian Conservation Core, Legal Services, Volunteers in Service to America, the Neighborhood Job Corps, and later, Head Start. The most innovative and controversial aspect of the administration's War on Poverty was, of course, the Community Action Program (CAP) in which the poor would help plan their own rehabilitation and empowerment. On the positive side, CAP helped bring have-nots into the democratic process. The program created a "reform constituency," producing a network of local NGOs that would serve the poor long after the Office of Economic Opportunity passed into history. On the negative side, it alienated urban political machines, mostly Democratic, who saw community action participants as rivals for power.

LBJ, like Bill Clinton, insisted that the goal of his welfare programs was to end welfare by eliminating the need for it. But the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO) had as its objective filling the welfare rolls to the breaking point, in hopes of destabilizing the system. Some of the organization's activists were Black Power adherents; but some, such as Daniel Patrick Moynihan, were liberals who favored a guaranteed annual income. Whatever the case, the actions of the NWRO played into the hands of conservatives, who used it in their ongoing war on the nation's "bloated welfare system." The War on Poverty was attacked on the left because it did not do enough, and on the right because it tried to do too much. According to Allen Matusow, Johnson's poverty program failed because it was underfunded, emphasized individual opportunity, and involved accommodation with local political machines and vested interests.

From the conservative camp, George Gilder, in *Wealth and Poverty*, denounced the EOA and other programs as "demoralizing blandishments" that created an epidemic of dependency, which resulted in "a wreckage of broken lives and families worse than the aftermath of slavery." Public opinion polls at the time showed the American people almost evenly split as to whether poverty was a matter of individual responsibility or the result of conditions and events beyond the individual's control.

What made Johnson's War on Poverty different from previous efforts at what social scientists term "relief-giving" was that it targeted African Americans. The real motive behind efforts to alleviate poverty, skeptics claim, was not compassion but a desire to regulate the supply of cheap labor and maintain social control. As the largest and most disadvantaged group in society, blacks were most likely to lead the revolution. There was certainly some of that motive in LBJ's programs. In trying to sell Project 100,000—a scheme to help some of the masses of young men who failed the Armed Forces Qualification Test each year—Johnson told Richard Russell, a skeptic, that if the government did not help down-and-out young blacks, they would soon be storming the country's gated communities. Johnson would become a critic of CAP because it threatened local Democratic political machines. He made it clear that he remained committed to the traditional progressive value of equality of opportunity, as opposed to entitlements. Ironically, white working- and middleclass Americans came increasingly to view the War on Poverty as a strategy of income entitlement, something they deeply resented. Another group of critics charged that the War on Poverty led to a rising level of expectations among African Americans, which, when they were not met, produced the wave of urban violence that swept the country in the 1960s, prompting a backlash among whites.

The consensus among scholars seems to be that, despite its flaws, the War on Poverty did affect the country's poor in positive ways. Most obviously, it kept Michael Harrington's *Other America* on the public's radar screen. In some communities it brought the poor, especially disadvantaged African Americans, into the political process. And it left behind a network of support that has endured. In his study of New Orleans, Kent Germany found that the War on Poverty, especially CAP, created a "Soft State," comprised of federal bureaucracies, neighborhood groups, state social agencies, and nonprofit organizations that, after 1970, distributed more than \$100 million in federal funding, primarily in black communities.

Even the Great Society's harshest critics acknowledge that it contributed enormously to the Second Reconstruction, racial justice, and black empowerment. There is no doubt that LBJ built on a deep commitment of the Kennedy administration, and specifically on initiatives launched by Robert Kennedy's Justice Department and Bob McNamara at the Pentagon.

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In their book, *The Heart of Power*, David Blumenthal and James Morone conclude that “LBJ was the most important health care president the United States has ever had.” Bob Dallek sees Medicare and Medicaid as another example of a projection of Johnson’s personal concerns into national policy. The Texan himself cited the haunting memory of his stroked-out paternal grandmother enduring a lingering death at the family home in Johnson City. In this vein, Edward Berkowitz and others note that LBJ’s health care program began with another declaration of war, this time against heart disease, cancer, and strokes. Johnson’s concern with health issues began well before he became president. In the 1940s and ‘50s, in the House and Senate, he led the way in side-stepping political opposition to national health care by dramatically increasing federal funding for medical research through the National Institutes of Health.

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As with other Great Society programs, scholarship on education policy is rather spotty, but those who have tackled the subject are almost unanimous in their conclusion that Johnson’s was the first “education presidency.” Indeed, Lawrence MacAndrew terms the signing of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) as “nothing short of a legislative miracle.” Scholars have identified the three principal obstacles to federal aid to education: race, religion, and Rules. Frank Munger and Richard Fenno explore the white South’s fear that education reform would be just another opening wedge for Washington to impose integration on Dixie. Diane Ravitch attributes the opposition of parochial school supporters, primarily Catholics and evangelicals, to paying taxes in support of schools their children would not attend.

Finally, James Sundquist focuses on the anti-statist, conservative House Rules Committee. As Johnson had envisaged, passage of the Equal Accommodations Bill and Voting Rights Act took much of the steam out of racist opposition to federal aid to education. Next, a bill focusing aid on individual students rather than schools quieted the parochial-versus-public storm. The president personally took care of the Rules Committee, boxing in its reactionary chair, Judge Howard Smith.

Those who have studied implementation of ESEA give it mixed reviews. While the number of young people earning high school diplomas during the 1960s increased from 60 percent to 75 percent, and the number attending college grew from 22 to 32 percent, Irwin Unger notes that academic achievement for African Americans and poor whites showed little or no improvement. Federal money there might have been, but control of educational policy remained in the hands of state and local authorities.

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According to David Steigerwald, the Johnson administration was more attentive to the special needs of the American city than any presidency before or since. Among its accomplishments were the establishment of the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the Model Cities Program, and the Fair Housing Act of 1968. Most historians credit LBJ and his lieutenants with good intentions, but nearly all are critical of the results. When LBJ entered office, three broad developments had come together to threaten the modern city: deindustrialization, which deprived urban areas of jobs and tax bases; the postwar diaspora of Southerners into the metropolitan areas of the North and West, which was fraught with racial implications; and problems of both housing supply and distribution.

James Gregory has chronicled the magnitude of white flight from the South. Just over 4 million Southerners fled Dixie in the 1940s, slightly more than 4,250,000 in the 1950s, and some 3,326,000 in the 1960s. White out-migration dwarfed the movement of blacks into Northern and Western cities. That population flow contributed to an already severe postwar housing shortage, and the resulting competition for housing greatly exacerbated racial tensions. Aided and abetted by the Federal Housing Administration, local authorities and real estate agents systematically created or augmented the ghettos that were to explode in the 1960s.

Hardly an urbanite when he came to the presidency—although he would live most of his adult life in Washington, D.C.—Johnson was determined to compel the country to rise above its anti-city bias and support a national policy for urban renewal. His Special Message to Congress on Cities came on March 2, 1965. As Howard Gillette points out, the steps he recommended reflected two principal forms of American urban policy. The first aimed at redesigning the physical environment in order “to make cities beautiful,” and the second dealt with socioeconomic conditions in order “to make cities just.”

Johnson asked for and eventually obtained from Congress a new Department of Housing and Urban Development. He named Robert C. Weaver, an African American, to run the agency. Efforts to use HUD’s control of resources to compel municipalities to participate in public housing programs and to commit to open housing invariably ran up against conservative congressmen and mayors who denounced Johnson and Weaver as dictators out to deprive middle-class whites of the freedom of association and the right to dispense with their property as they saw fit. Model Cities, which aimed at integrating social, economic, and physical reforms in target cities, died aborning because of these same attitudes and, ultimately, insufficient funding.

The law-and-order theme that boosted George Wallace and Richard Nixon’s campaigns in 1968 was rooted in the urban rioting that swept the country in the mid- and late-1960s. Most historians agree that the passage of the Fair Housing Act of 1968, anemic though it might have been, was an amazing achievement in the midst of this carnage. It is clear that Johnson decided in 1965-66 that a solution to the urban crisis was crucial to the future of the country, and that open housing was fundamental to racial justice.

# The Great Society at Fifty

*What LBJ wrought*

May 19, 2014, Vol. 19, No. 34

BY [NICHOLAS EBERSTADT](#)

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What began under Johnson continued—or, more often, expanded—under all successive presidents. Not even Ronald Reagan managed to reverse the growth of government set in motion by that call for the Great Society. Thus, the American welfare state as we know it today is very largely the outcome of forces Johnson unleashed in the first half-year of his presidency. (The most appreciable addition to this apparatus over the past half-century is arguably Obamacare, the health care guarantees forged into law under the Affordable Care Act of 2010.)

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Since 1964, the welfare state has devoted considerable resources to assuring or improving the public's living standards—something like \$20 trillion in inflation-adjusted dollars through antipoverty programs alone, by one calculation. What sort of effect have these programs had on deprivation and its attendant miseries?

If we were to judge the performance of our welfare state solely by the statistical measure invented to gauge national performance in the War on Poverty—the “poverty rate”—we would have to conclude the whole effort has been a miserable and unmitigated failure. The true picture, however, is rather more complex than that same poverty rate is capable of depicting, though not necessarily much more heartening.

According to the official poverty rate, the proportion of our population below the poverty line was dropping rapidly in the years immediately before the War on Poverty was fully underway. In the seven years between 1959 and 1966, according to the Census Bureau, the proportion of our country living in poverty dropped by about a third, from 22.4 to 14.7 percent. Since then, however, the official poverty rate has been essentially stuck. It reached an all-time low of 11.1 percent in 1973, in the Nixon era, then drifted uncertainly back upward. For the year 2012, the most recent such data available, the national poverty rate was 15.0 percent—slightly higher, in other words, than back in 1966.

The official poverty picture looks even worse the more closely one focuses on it. According to those same official numbers, the poverty rate for all families was no lower in 2012 than in 1966. The poverty rate for American children under 18 is higher now than it was then. The poverty rate for the working-age population (18-64) is also higher now than back then. The poverty rate for whites is higher now than it was then. Poverty rates for Hispanic Americans have been tracked only since 1972—but these likewise are higher today than back then. Shocking as this may sound, only a few groups within our society—most importantly, Americans 65 and older and African Americans of all ages—registered any appreciable improvement in poverty rates between 1966 and 2012.

If those official numbers reflected reality in America, all this would be cause for the gravest alarm. After all, the official poverty rate is meant to count the percentage of the population living on incomes below a threshold set back in the early 1960s and adjusted since then only to keep up with inflation. That threshold was meant to provide only a severe and stringent household budget—as stringency was envisioned half a century ago. But of course, America is a vastly richer society today. According to the Bureau of Economic Analysis, real per capita disposable income in our country in 2012 was two and a half times the 1966 level. And according to data compiled by the Federal Reserve, private wealth grew even faster over that same period.

Taken together, these soundings would seem to conjure up the ghastly image of “immiserating growth,” that fatal tendency of modern capitalist systems, at least according to some postwar neo-Marxian theorists. But the proposition that a higher fraction of Americans are stuck in absolute poverty today than nearly half a century ago cannot be taken seriously. It is preposterous on its very face.

Consider that the health of Americans of all ages is markedly better now than then: life expectancy at birth rose by more than eight years between 1966 and 2010 alone and is higher at every age these days—even for centenarians. Americans are not only healthier, but also much more educated—in 1966, nearly a third of adults 25 or older had a grade school education or less, compared to just 5 percent in 2013. And Americans are more likely now to be working in paid jobs: Despite the terrible 2008 economic crash, the percentage of employed adults 20 and older was still higher in 2013 than in 1966 (61 percent versus 57 percent).

The idea that such a population would at the same time suffer a higher incidence of absolute poverty does not even pass the laugh test. This picture is an illusion, a distorted reflection from the statistical variant of a funhouse mirror, and the funhouse mirror in

question is the poverty rate itself. The poverty rate is a highly misleading measure of living standards and material deprivation—incurably misleading, in fact.

The central and irresolvable trouble with the official poverty rate is that it presumes an immediate and exact equivalence between income levels and consumption levels—so that any home in any year with a reported income level below the poverty line must perforce also be constrained to sub-poverty-line spending power. In real-world America, by contrast, income is a poor predictor of spending power for lower-income groups at any given point in time—and that predictive power has dramatically worsened over the course of our postwar era.

In 1960-61, according to the BLS Consumer Expenditure Survey, the bottom one-fourth of American homes spent about 12 percent more than their pretax reported incomes each year. By 2011, according to that same survey, those in the lowest quintile were spending nearly 125 percent more than their reported pretax incomes and nearly 120 percent more than their reported posttax, posttransfer incomes.

This growing discrepancy between income and expenditures on the part of the poorer strata in recent decades is by no means impossible to explain. Not least important, households are subject to greater year-to-year earnings swings than in the past and have greater wherewithal (through borrowing, asset drawdowns, and other means) to buffer their consumption when they hit a bad year, or even a couple of bad years. But this phenomenon also means that people reporting ostensibly poverty-level incomes are less and less likely to be consigned to poverty-level living standards, as that standard was originally conceived in the early 1960s. Increasing noncash transfers of means-tested public benefits (including, especially, health care) only further widen the gap between reported income and actual consumption for America's "poverty population."

Thus, the actual living conditions of people counted as living "in poverty" in America today bear very little resemblance to those of Americans enumerated as poor in the first official government count attempted in 1965. By 2011, for example, average per capita housing space for people in poverty was higher than the U.S. average for 1980, and crowding (more than one person per room) was less common for the 2011 poor than for the nonpoor in 1970. More than three-quarters of the 2011 poor had access to one or more motor vehicles, whereas nearly three-fifths were without an auto in 1972-73. Refrigerators, dishwashers, washers and dryers, and many other appliances were more common in officially impoverished homes in 2011 than in the typical American home of 1980 or earlier. Microwaves were virtually universal in poor homes in 2011, and DVD players, personal computers, and home Internet access are now typical in them—amenities not even the richest U.S. households could avail themselves of at the start of the War on Poverty. Further, Americans counted as poor today are manifestly healthier, better nourished (or overnourished), and more schooled than their predecessors half a century ago.

To be clear: The poor in America are not well-to-do. They are poorer than the rest of America. This has not changed. What has changed is their standard of living—which has risen markedly since the beginning of the War on Poverty, as have living standards for all the rest of us. Work by economists like Daniel Slesnick at the University of Texas, Bruce Meyer at the University of Chicago, and James X. Sullivan at the University of Notre Dame demonstrates that an ever-smaller share of our country subsists on consumption levels demarcated by our old, official, 1960s-era poverty line.

Consumption-focused assessments of the poverty problem are stunningly different from our official numbers. In a recent research paper, for example, Meyer and Sullivan indicate that such "consumption poverty" afflicted less than 4 percent of the population in 2008. In the wake of the 2008 crash, "consumption poverty" rose—but as of 2010, when postcrash conditions were possibly most dire, just 3.7-4.5 percent of America was subject to it, according to their calculations.

This research underscores a significant point, all too often misunderstood in both policy and intellectual circles today. Poverty in America—the sort of material deprivation people knew back in the 1960s—has been all but eliminated. This should not be a surprise, considering both the many intervening decades of general economic advancement and the tremendous outlays of government antipoverty funds, currently averaging about \$9,000 in total expenses and \$7,000 in transfer value per year for every person in our nation designated as a recipient in need.

We cannot say the War on Poverty was a necessary condition for the near-complete abolition of 1960s-style poverty, insofar as we cannot know what the rate of progress would have been without those efforts. But we can say that the War on Poverty has proved to be a sufficient condition for achieving this great objective.

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So the long War on Poverty has indeed managed to eradicate 1960s-style poverty from our midst, or very nearly so—even if our federal authorities today are not competent to describe this accomplishment (or, seemingly, even recognize the accomplishment in the first place). This is an important fact in favor of the War on Poverty—but other important facts must be considered as well, all seemingly weighing on the other side of the ledger. For the institutionalization of antipoverty policy has been attended by the rise and spread of an ominous "tangle of pathologies" in the society whose ills antipoverty policies were intended to heal. Those pathologies appear to be conjoined with antipoverty policies; in some cases, antipoverty policies may possibly create them, but irrespective of the causality at work, they are clearly very largely financed today by antipoverty policies.

The phrase "tangle of pathologies" harks back to the famous Moynihan Report of 1965, which warned of the crisis of the family then gathering for black America. That report was criticized, even viciously denounced, at the time, but in retrospect much of it seems positively prophetic.

The Moynihan argument also assumed that the troubles impending for black America were unique—a consequence of the singular historical burdens that black Americans had endured. That argument was not only plausible at the time, but persuasive. Yet today

that same “tangle of pathology” can no longer be described as characteristic of just one group. Quite the contrary: These pathologies are evident throughout all of America today, regardless of race or ethnicity. Three of the most disturbing of these many entangled pathologies are welfare dependency, the flight from work, and family breakdown.

**Welfare Dependency.** Unlike, say, an old-age pension awarded after a lifetime of work, a bestowal of charity or aid to the indigent is a transaction that establishes a relationship of dependence. As a people who have prized their independence, financial as well as political, Americans throughout history have attempted to avoid dependence on “relief” and other handouts. Recovery from the Great Depression was corroborated by the great decline in the numbers of Americans on public aid: In 1951, the commissioner of Social Security was pleased to report that just 3.8 percent of Americans were receiving public aid, down from 11.5 percent as recently as 1940. But with the War on Poverty and its successor programs, such dependency has become routine. The United States today is richer than at any previous juncture—yet, paradoxically, more Americans than ever before are officially judged to be in need. Welfare dependence is at an all-time high and by all indications set to climb in the years ahead.

Perhaps tellingly, the U.S. government did not get around to collecting data and publishing figures on the proportion of the population dependent on need-based benefits on a systematic basis until nearly two decades after the start of the War on Poverty, during the Reagan era. By then (1983), nearly one American in five (18.8 percent) lived in a home taking in one or more means-tested benefits.

By 2012, according to one Census Bureau count, the proportion was almost one in three: 32.3 percent and “only” 29.4 percent if school lunches were excluded from the tally. This still left more than 90 million Americans applying for and accepting aid from government antipoverty programs. But only 33 million people from America’s “poverty population” were enrolled in those same means-tested programs. In other words, nearly twice as many Americans above the poverty line as below it were getting antipoverty benefits. Evidently, the American welfare state has been defining deprivation upward.

In the 1990s, a bipartisan political consensus enacted “welfare reform”—but it would be misleading to overestimate the effect of that adjustment on the long-term rise in dependency. That “welfare reform” took aim at just one especially controversial and unpopular program: aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), a facet of the original Social Security legislation, but one that had been allowed to mutate into a vehicle for financing unwed motherhood and intergenerational dependency.

AFDC’s reach was always limited—in 1983 only 4.2 percent of Americans lived in homes receiving aid from it, according to Census Bureau estimates—and that fraction has been pared down to just 2.0 percent in 2011. On the other hand, most of the other means-tested programs have extended their reach over those same years: public housing, income transfers from AFDC alternatives, food stamps, Medicaid, and more. Since the advent of “welfare reform,” the proportion of the American population relying on at least some entitlement benefit from the government has jumped by another 10 percentage points.

By 2012, according to one Census Bureau count, significant demographic subgroups within the American population were well along the path to means-tested majorities—that is to say, toward the point where more members than not of the groups in question would be claiming benefits from government antipoverty programs. More than 47 percent of all black Americans and fully 48 percent of Hispanic Americans of all ages were reckoned to be taking home means-tested benefits (excluding subsidized school lunches from the tally, here and in the rest of this discussion). More than 60 percent of black and Hispanic children, and nearly 43 percent of all American children, were depending on antipoverty programs for at least some support. Dependency was less pronounced among children of Asian Americans and non-Hispanic whites, but only to a degree—for both those groups, the ratio was close to 30 percent. In all of the aforementioned cases, most of the beneficiaries drawing on government poverty program resources were men, women, and children not officially counted as poor.

In affluent democracies, children are not expected to be self-supporting—nor, necessarily, are their mothers. For men in the prime of life, expectations have always been different. In this sense, the most revealing measure of the spread of dependence is the declining financial independence of working-age American men. Among men 25 to 44 years of age, more than 25 percent lived in homes taking aid from antipoverty programs by 2012. For nonpoor men those same ages, the ratio was over 20 percent. While the proclivity was lower for working-age men living independently from families, nonetheless nearly 1 in 10 adult American men under 65 living alone were seeking and accepting need-based public aid by 2012.

The reach of dependence is perhaps best highlighted by its inroads into the parts of American society traditionally least ensnared by it. Historically, non-Hispanic whites have had the lowest dependence on public aid of any major racial or ethnic group delineated within official statistics—yet by 2012, nearly 1 in 5 nonpoor Anglo men ages 25-44, and about 1 in 11 under 65, nonpoor, and living alone, were on the government benefit rolls.

**The Flight from Work.** Although a higher fraction of Americans 20 and older are working today than at the start of the War on Poverty (61.2 percent in January 2014 versus 57.2 percent in January 1964), and though labor force participation rates are likewise higher today than 50 years ago, these overall figures mask two distinct tendencies.

On one hand, adult women are much more likely to be working or looking for work today than two generations ago. Labor force participation rates for women 20 and older are fully 20 percentage points higher today than in early 1964 (58.6 percent in January 2014 versus 38.5 percent in January 1964). A lifestyle that includes at least some paid employment has become the norm for American women over the past two generations.

On the other hand, men have been a diminishing presence within the workforce—and not only thanks to the rising share of women who seek to work. The proportion of men 20 and older who are employed has dramatically and almost steadily dropped since the start of the War on Poverty, falling from 80.6 percent in January 1964 to 67.6 percent 50 years later. No less remarkable: The



proportion of adult men in the labor force—either working or looking for work—has likewise plunged over those same years, from 84.2 percent then to 71.9 percent today. Put another way: Our country has seen a surge of men making a complete exit from the workforce over the past 50 years. Whereas fewer than 16 percent of men 20 or older neither had work nor were looking for it in early 1964, the corresponding share today is more than 28 percent.

In purely arithmetic terms, the main reason American men today are not working is not unemployment. Rather, it is because they have opted out of the labor market altogether. For every adult man who is between jobs and looking for new work, more than five are neither working nor looking for employment.

Even in what should be the prime of work life, this male flight from work has been apparent. Between early 1964 and early 2014, the proportion of civilian, noninstitutionalized men completely out of the labor force nearly quadrupled—from 3.2 percent to 12.6 percent. By the same token, the corresponding share of nonworkers for men 35-44 years of age more than tripled over those same years, from 2.5 percent in January 1964 to 9.0 percent in January 2014.

The withdrawal of progressively greater proportions of men—including relatively young men—from the U.S. workforce seems especially paradoxical when we consider the major improvements in health (as reflected in life expectancy) and educational attainment (as reflected in mean years of schooling) for the cohorts under consideration over those same years. All other things being equal, one might have assumed these changes would make men more capable of working, not less.

It is noteworthy that the male flight from work for prime working-age groups, striking as it has been, did not proceed uninterrupted over the entire postwar period. No, it only took place after the War on Poverty commenced. Between early 1948—when the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) began the current system for tracking workforce data—and early 1964, a period stretching more than a decade and a half, the proportion of unworking men 25-54 years of age remained essentially unchanged. The same was true for men 35-44 years of age. For men 25-34, the labor force participation rate actually rose from 96.1 percent in January 1948 to 97.1 percent in January 1964. Only since the War on Poverty began to offer alternatives to work for able-bodied men have we seen a major migration of men in prime working ages out of the time-established path of work.

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Family Breakdown. In the early postwar era, the norm for childbearing and child-rearing was the married two-parent household. Norm and reality were not identical, of course—but for the country as a whole, the gap was not immense. Illegitimacy was on the rise in the early postwar era, but as late as 1963, on the eve of the War on Poverty, more than 93 percent of American babies were coming into the world with two married parents. According to the 1960 census, nearly 88 percent of children under 18 were then living with two parents. That fraction was slightly higher than it had been before World War II, thanks in part to improving survival chances for parents and the correspondingly diminished risk of orphanhood.

Unfortunately, the rise of the new welfare policies inaugurated by the War on Poverty coincided with a marked change in family formation patterns in America. Out-of-wedlock births exploded. Divorce and separation soared. The fraction of children living in two-parent homes commenced a continuing downward spiral. These new patterns are so pervasive, and so politically sensitive, that some today object even to describing the phenomenon as “family breakdown.” But the phenomenon has swept through all of American society over the past 50 years, leaving no ethnic group untouched.

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The collapse of the traditional family structure has been underway among the majority population of non-Hispanic whites as well. For Anglos, there were few signs of impending family breakdown in the generation before the War on Poverty; between 1940 and 1963, the out-of-wedlock birth ratio increased, but only from 2 percent to 3 percent, and in 1960, just 6 percent of white children lived with single mothers. In 2012, the proportion of out-of-wedlock births was 29 percent—nearly 10 times as high as it was just before the War on Poverty. By 2013, more than 18 percent of Anglo children were in single-mother homes—three times the proportion before the War on Poverty—and over one-quarter lived outside two-parent homes. By 2009, less than two-thirds of Anglo children were living with both biological parents, and fewer than five out of eight were with biological parents who were married to each other. Thus, Anglo whites today register illegitimacy ratios markedly higher than those ratios were for African Americans when Moynihan called attention to the crisis in the black family—and proportions of single-parent children look eerily comparable.

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Surveying this new American landscape of dependency, voluntary male joblessness, and family decay, an unavoidable question confronts our society: How are these perverse features of our daily life related to the rise of the modern American welfare state? Is it simply a coincidence that welfare dependence, the male flight from work, and accelerated family breakdown all happened to coincide with the sustained domestic policy shift heralded by the Great Society? As philosophers and statisticians are careful to caution, conjuncture does not establish causation. But this broad and important conjuncture is surely thought-provoking and invites both deep reflection and careful examination.

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Suffice it to say that none of these troubling mass phenomena was envisioned when the War on Poverty commenced. Just the opposite—President Johnson saw the War on Poverty as a campaign to bring dependency on government handouts to an eventual end, not as a means of perpetuating them for generations to come. He made this very clear three months after his Great Society speech at the signing ceremony for some of his initial War on Poverty legislation, when he announced:

We are not content to accept the endless growth of relief rolls or welfare rolls. . . . Our American answer to poverty is not to make the poor more secure in their poverty but to reach down and to help them lift themselves out of the ruts of poverty and move with the large majority along the high road of hope and prosperity. The days of the dole in our country are numbered.

Held against this ideal, the actual unfolding of America's domestic antipoverty policies can be seen only as a tragic failure.

Dependence on government relief, in its many modern versions, is more widespread today, and possibly also more habitual, than at any time in our history. To make matters much worse, such aid has become integral to financing lifestyles and behavioral patterns plainly destructive to our commonwealth—and on a scale far vaster than could have been imagined in an era before such antipoverty aid was all but unconditionally available.

The Great Society was by no means a wholesale failure. America has two great achievements to celebrate and take pride in from the Great Society. That agenda finally, and decisively, brought an end to the long, hateful stain of legalized racial discrimination within our nation. And it has all but eliminated the sort of material deprivation that tens of millions of Americans in the early 1960s still suffered.

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